

25th Anniversary * 3rd Edition

PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACES

*Dignity, Meaning, and
Community in the
21st Century*

MARVIN WEISBORD

*THE CLASSIC WORK * REVISED AND EXPANDED*

“I have been a fan of Marv Weisbord’s for years. His thoughts and understanding of how people and organizations accomplish work improves with each update of *Productive Workplaces*. He is a master of this subject and, most importantly, he helps us practice what he teaches.”

—Richard G. Haworth, Chairman Emeritus, HAWORTH, INC.

“Weisbord has been a major voice in the theory and practice of organization development (OD) since the early 1970s. This book is a wonderful history and reinterpretation of many of the events, schools of thought, and controversies that have punctuated the field from its beginnings. It should be required reading for every organization behavior and development scholar. Among its many virtues, the book is beautifully written.”

—Peter Vaill, Senior Scholar and Emeritus Professor of Management,
Antioch University Ph.D. Program in Leadership and Change,
author of *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival
in a World of Permanent White Water* and *Spirited Leading
and Learning* (Minneapolis, MN, USA).

“During my thirty-three-year career, I have been involved in publishing well over one thousand books. *Productive Workplaces* is certainly among the top five most influential in terms of its impact on the organizations in which I worked as well as on my personal leadership, management concepts, and practices.”

—Steven Piersanti, President and Publisher, Berrett-Koehler
Publishers, Inc. (San Francisco, CA, USA, formerly president,
Jossey-Bass Publishers)

“Reading the 1987 version of PW in the early nineties was a major stepping stone for me towards a more fulfilling, creative, and dynamic way of thinking and working.”

—Richard Wilkinson, HR Director, International Training & Education Center for Health (I-TECH) a partnership of the University of Washington and University of California—
San Francisco (Seattle, WA, USA)

“I discovered *Productive Workplaces* when I began teaching in the Pepperdine MBA program in 1990. I loved that Marvin had gone back and read the primary resource material written by the great management thinkers of the twentieth century: Taylor, McGregor, Lewin, Emery, and Trist. The book provides a cogent overview of management thought and how it has evolved over the last century.”

—Miriam Y. Lacey, Ph.D., Academic Director and Professor, MSOD Program, Graziadio School of Business and Management, Pepperdine University (Malibu, CA, USA)

“PW illuminated a path that would become my life’s work. Future Search gave me the practical understanding and tools to take the journey.”

—Shem Cohen (USA), Change Events, Inc.

“Reading *Productive Workplaces* we encountered a vision of a workplace in which people matter, teams collaborate, and direct participation enables individuals to contribute their full range of talents. That vision is just as relevant today as in 1987—perhaps more so—as change becomes constant and speed becomes imperative.”

—Frederick A. Miller and Judith H. Katz, The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc., authors of *The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Real Power of Diversity* (Albany, NY, USA)

“Organizations that value ‘dignity, meaning, and community’ are not born overnight. The wisdom I have gained from *Productive Workplaces Revisited* has provided me with techniques, processes, and the openness I need for consulting to organizations that aspire to build these values into their cultures.”

—Richard Beckerman, President, Richard Beckerman Consulting
(Seattle, WA, USA)

“I have a much-dog-eared copy of *Productive Workplaces*, which I read while managing an R&D lab at NYNEX (then the ‘Baby Bell’ in New York and New England). The book was a turning point for me. It inspired me to run against the grain of re-engineering with a participative work design project for a critical business process. That project was one of the most successful among a spate conducted during the re-engineering craze at NYNEX (and it required no new technology!).”

—Jim Euchner, Visiting Scientist, MIT Sloan School of Management
(Cambridge, MA, USA)

“As a professor in graduate studies in leadership and business psychology, I see my role as passing on to a new generation the values and lessons learned from a twenty-five-year career in organizational effectiveness. Marvin Weisbord is a master whose wisdom I encourage my students to seek out. *Productive Workplaces* has been an anchor in my life and career. It is my mission to see that it becomes the anchor for a new generation of practitioners.”

—Connie S. Fuller, Ph.D., Associate Chair and Assistant Professor,
Business Psychology, The Chicago School of Professional
Psychology (Chicago, IL, USA) co-author, *Bridging the
Boomer-Xer Gap: Creating Authentic Teams for
High Performance at Work*.

“I devoured the first edition of *Productive Workplaces*. Here was a book that confirmed everything I had experienced in my consulting career. I felt validated. Today when people ask me where they can learn about the history of the field, this is the one book I recommend.”

—Dick Axelrod, The Axelrod Group (Chicago, IL, USA), author of *Terms of Engagement: New Ways of Leading and Changing Organizations*.

“PW has shaped the way I have approached my consulting practice for nearly twenty-five years.”

—Loretta Raider, Principal, The Raider Consulting Group
(Melrose Park, PA, USA)

“*Productive Workplaces* (PW) is more than a book about the field of organization development; it also shows the possibility for aligning yourself with basic values about [organization and management] and some hints about trying new ideas for yourself. This takes courage, of course, and courage has meaning only in situations where you are in doubt. With PW in your hands you are not alone.”

—Henrik Simmelkjær, Consultant (Kolding, Denmark), former secretary of European Institute for Transnational Studies in Group and Organizational Development (eit).

“This is the OD book of the century.”

—Bengt Lindstrom, Ander & Lindstrom, AB (Stockholm, Sweden)

“Marvin Weisbord’s story of his own encounter with worker participation in his family business was a ‘me-too’ story of great power. To read the unfolding argument in favour of letting ‘those with a stake in the problem help define and solve it’ was riveting—it affirmed and informed my research and my practice as a consultant to industry then, and continues to do so now.”

—Verna Blewett, Associate Professor, Occupational Health and Safety, University of South Australia (Adelaide, Australia)

“If somebody asks me to name just one good book on management, or organization development, or social psychology, I give them the same answer: *Productive Workplaces*. It addresses the heady topic of meaning and dignity in work with writing that is as engaging as a well-written novel.”

—Gil Steil, Gil Steil Associates (Boston, MA, USA)

“So far as I know, PW provides the only systematic review of multiple cases over the longer term, fifteen to thirty years after the intervention.”

—Tonnie Van der Zouwen, Ph.D., Van der Zouwen Consultancy,
author of *Building an Evidence Based Practical Guide to Large
Scale Interventions: Towards Sustainable Change with the
Whole System* (Vlijmen, Netherlands)

“While I can’t say that *Productive Workplaces* saved me from a burning building or plucked me from a raging river, I can say that this book slowly, systematically changed my thinking, my career, and my life.”

—Birgit C. Olsen, Higher Education Consultant, doctoral student in
organizational psychology, Walden University
(Los Angeles, CA, USA)

“*Productive Workplaces* has been required reading since 1987 in Seattle University’s Organization Systems Renewal (OSR) graduate program (formerly at Antioch Seattle). OSR’s founding principle is to learn the theory, acquire the knowledge, and practice the skills required for putting theory into action. That is exactly what PW shows you how to do.”

—Bob Woodruff, The Woodruff Group and Institute for Systemic Learning; former director and faculty, OSR (Seattle, WA, USA)

“For the past quarter of a century and for the foreseeable future, the clear and elegant expression of Marvin Weisbord in his books and his personal support have inspired untold numbers of practitioners dedicated to organizing and managing for dignity, meaning, and community. We are indebted to him and love him for his contribution to our work.”

—Neil Watson, Independent SocioTechnical Systems Consultant
(Sydney, Australia)

“Reading the preface of *Productive Workplaces*, I was touched by these words: ‘There are no technical alternatives to personal responsibility and cooperation in the workplace.’ To me, that sounded like coming home!”

—Hans Begeer, co-founder, Ubuntu4u (Brussels, Belgium)

“Learning from experience is somewhat of a cliché, but as the reader enters Marvin’s thoughtful insights and reflections, the trip becomes an exciting journey.”

—From the Foreword by Billie Alban

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Why is this topic important?

Productive Workplaces, 25th Anniversary Edition, traces the origins of and validates “getting the whole system in the room,” a principle that has influenced large scale projects ever since the 1987 edition. The book was voted one of the five most influential books in the field by the Organization Development Network in 2004. It provides a model, guidelines, and successful methods for improving organizations under conditions of nonstop change. This may be the only book of its kind, for it includes follow-ups to ten projects done fifteen to thirty years earlier; the author not only reports what happened afterward, but also draws implications for managers and consultants today. With this glance backward, the book challenges the myth that you can “build in” practices that ensure continuity of new norms when leadership, staff, markets, technology, and ownership are constantly changing. “Each new generation,” says Weisbord, “must learn all over again for itself.” In this edition he supports his contention with forty new stories from practitioners who read earlier editions and applied the ideas to their own work.

What can you achieve with this book?

You can learn how to establish conditions for success before undertaking complex change projects. You will gain a deeper appreciation of key management practices and why some work better than others. The book will lead you to rethink, appreciate, and learn from your own experience and

confirm that values matter more than techniques. It will help you become more secure and competent to face unprecedented dilemmas of nonstop change and cultural diversity.

How is this book organized?

The book contains five sections, revised to enhance the original by cutting some parts and adding contemporary material. Part One provides the bookends of Weisbord's story, starting with a summary of his conclusions after fifty years of practice, then backing up to tell the story of how he got started as a manager. Part Two tells key stories from management history, comparing the work of Frederick Taylor, "father of scientific management," to that of social scientists who came after. Part Three presents cases involving typical managerial dilemmas that illustrate an evolution in practice from expert problem solving toward involving everyone in whole-systems improvement. The cases were updated in the 2000s, with implications for today. Chapters added in 2003 on seminal workshops in primary medical care and steel production show the benefits of having whole systems study themselves. Part Four presents a practice theory for managing and consulting in the new millennium. It includes key guidelines for success and how-to methods by which the theory can be applied. It also shows how one company saved itself from oblivion using these guidelines. Part Five has new chapters on choosing among large-group methods and a summary chapter answering critical questions about the nature of change and the practice of effective workplace improvement.

What other *Productive Workplaces* resources are available?

An Instructor's Guide is available highlighting key points and questions raised by each chapter at www.pfeiffer.com/go/weisbord. At www.organizationaldynamics.upenn.edu you will find the Marvin Weisbord Archive, containing video interviews with many people mentioned in the book, plus cases studies and documentaries illustrating the themes. At MarvinWeisbord.com you will find downloadable versions of several cited articles.

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**DIGNITY, MEANING, AND
COMMUNITY IN THE 21ST
CENTURY**

25th Anniversary Edition

Marvin R. Weisbord

**The workplace classic, revised
and expanded to include six new
chapters and forty reader stories**

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Sitting in my local movie theater one Saturday at age eight, I was astonished a monochromatic film changed into brilliant Technicolor. *The Wizard of Oz* became my initiation into the illusory power of technology. Dorothy and her terrier Toto, blown by a Kansas tornado to a magic land, learn that only the Great and Terrible Oz can send them home. On the Yellow Brick Road to Oz, they meet a Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion, each seeking a missing part: heart, brains, courage. The creatures join Dorothy and Toto, hoping the Wizard will make them whole.

The Great Oz awes them with his magic, appearing as a giant head, a lovely lady, and a ball of fire. He booms out that to have their wishes they must kill the Wicked Witch of the West. The quartet and Toto take on this risky quest. With axe, straw, and loud roar they defeat the wolves, crows, and bees sent to stop them. When all looks hopeless, Dorothy, protecting her friends, pours water on the Witch. To her astonishment, this simple solution melts the evil hag into oblivion.

They return for their rewards, and Toto, poking around, tips over a screen to reveal the Great and Terrible Oz as an old bald guy creating illusions with a homemade contraption. “Oh, you are a very bad man!” says Dorothy. “Oh no, my dear,” says the Wizard, “I’m a very good man. I’m a very bad Wizard.”

He then pretends to deliver heart, brains, and courage to Dorothy’s companions, knowing that they already found these qualities while questing to kill the Witch.

“How can I help being a humbug, when all these people make me do things that everybody knows can’t be done?” asks the Wizard. Later he suggests that Dorothy return to Kansas by clicking her heels three times, a capability she always had. Until that moment, she did not know that she had it.

I dedicate this book to Dorothy Barclay Weisbord, my lifelong companion on the Yellow Brick Road.

**OTHER BOOKS BY
MARVIN R. WEISBORD**

Campaigning for President

Some Form of Peace

Improving Police Department Management (with Howard Lamb and Alan Drexler)

Organizational Diagnosis: A Workbook of Theory and Practice

Discovering Common Ground (with thirty-five international authors)

Future Search: An Action Guide (with Sandra Janoff)

Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! (with Sandra Janoff)

Other Resources

Visit the Marvin Weisbord Archive of interviews and case studies bringing to life people, cases, and stories from this book on the website of the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania www.organizationaldynamics.upenn.edu/.

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FOREWORD: THE EXISTENTIAL QUESTION

Years ago I was traveling on a tanker off the West Coast of South America crossing the equator into the southern hemisphere. It was a brilliant starry night. I had never seen the Southern Cross before, and there it was on the horizon. I was joined on the deck by a crew member. We stood there, the two of us, tiny, human specks under the dome of this incredible night. He turned to me and asked, “Señora, do you think we make any difference?” I have pondered that question most of my life.

I invited one of the people who contributed a story to the current edition of this book to tell me what she thought the word “meaning” signified in the subtitle of the first edition (*Organizing and Managing for Dignity, Meaning, and Community*). She responded, “The opportunity to make a positive difference in your workplace or organization.”

Marvin Weisbord, with the publication of the first edition, made a major contribution to the field of organization development. This third edition of *Productive Workplaces* contains forty new stories and examples, interspersed among the chapters and contributed by people from all over the world: Scandinavia, Australia, South Africa, the U.S., UK, Europe, Canada, New Zealand, and Afghanistan. These managers, consultants, teachers, and students found that the concepts and ideas in Weisbord’s book have resonated for them and influenced what they have done in their workplaces and communities.

The first chapter, “A Mythology of Organizational Change,” sets the framework for the book. Marvin Weisbord, my colleague for four decades, points out that people’s behavior is based on the myths and assumptions they hold as true. The stories we tell ourselves and the assumptions we make influence our behavior and the choices we make.

In the second chapter of Part One, Marvin tells the story of his own experience in his family business. “How I Learned to Manage by Managing” tells the story of his struggles working with employees to set up multi-skilled work teams that focused on the customer. Not only did this highly participative process work, increasing productivity, but also brought to the workforce a sense of dignity, meaning, and community. As you will read, the walls literally came tumbling down. It was this experience that propelled Marvin to venture out on a learning journey.

This book is the story of his travels, starting with Fredrick Taylor and pursuing the theories and experiments of those who strove to improve organizations. Marvin is constantly testing, moving back and forth from theory into practice and practice into theory. The book contains wonderful reflections on the work and insights of Fredrick Taylor, Kurt Lewin, Douglas McGregor, Eric Trist, and Fred Emery.

I want to call attention to Parts Three and Four in this book “Learning from Experience” and “Integrating the Past into the Present.” Marvin highlights cases where he worked as a consultant searching to develop better organizations and workplaces, always testing theories and assumptions. What is remarkable about these sections is his return to these organizations, years after the work was completed, to find what had happened to the work they did together. How many consultants and managers dare go back to the sites where they have worked to learn what has occurred in the interim? It is a courageous thing to do! Many of us would rather live with the illusion that we made a difference and leave it at that!

The analyses of these cases is fascinating. Learning from experience is somewhat of a cliché, but as the reader enters Marvin’s thoughtful insights and reflections the trip becomes an exciting journey.

Two important cases in this book are from the Sparrows Point plant of Bethlehem Steel and Atomic Energy of Canada’s Medical Products Division (see Chapters Seventeen and Nineteen). These two cases offered a

major opportunity for “involving everyone to improve the whole system,” applying Marvin’s core principles from his experience. Marvin also reminds us “sustainable change is an oxymoron” (see Chapter One). Organizations and our interventions often do not outlast the waves of tumultuous internal and external change: new managers, technologies, mergers, changes in the economy. However, those who are involved in participative organizational renewal processes report that they wouldn’t have wanted to miss the experience. They carry the learning with them into the future.

Why, even when we get so fed up with bureaucratic and hierarchical systems, is it so hard to let go of old models? Could it be that early in our lives we are socialized into hierarchical systems—in family life, education, religious institutions, the military, and our early work experiences? Much as we disliked these systems, when push comes to shove we fall back on them, familiar and internalized. There is a wonderful examination of Douglas McGregor’s Theories X and Y in this book. Marvin points out that the X and Y polarities are internal dialogues within the individual, not just a way of categorizing organizations and management styles. Marvin quotes Kurt Lewin, “We know more about autocracy than we know about democracy.” In spite of the outstanding examples in this book, the act of working with these principles requires courage, daring to say “yes” to the dialogue within us.

I appreciated, throughout the book, the guidelines and principles that support the work of engaging everyone to improve the whole. I found myself noting many of the sage recommendations; guidelines for engaging the whole system, generic menus for work design, important insight in the use of team building, and, above all, always operating out of a clear set of values and principles, before worrying about methods and techniques.

Chapter Twenty-Six, the last chapter, has a wonderful closing section on “a life long agenda for managers and consultants.” It contains suggestions for our journeying as we look to make a difference where we work and live. Marvin points out that all change—social, technical, economic—takes place one meeting at a time. Thus we have boundless opportunities to make constructive changes through the meetings we have each day.

There is a beach in the southern part of Chile that is strewn with stones marked with crisscrosses, tossed up by the waves. Legend has it that the

Southern Cross periodically scatters these stones. People collect them as a talisman. It is said that these stones bring mental clarity, wisdom, and wholeness. As you go through this book you will find ideas that resonate for you, underscoring your own experience. You will also discover fresh insights and new ways of taking action. Gather these treasures and take them with you. Bon Voyage!

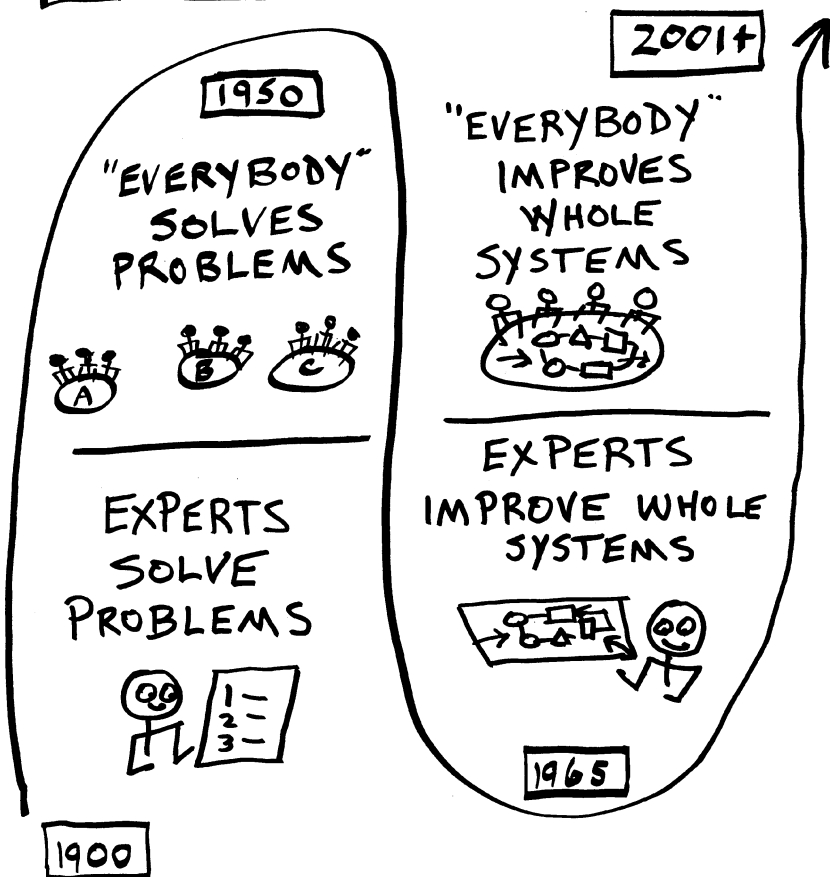
Billie Alban

**PREFACE: WELCOME TO *PRODUCTIVE
WORKPLACES*, 25TH ANNIVERSARY
EDITION**

This is a book about people who have sought for 150 years to improve life at work. For the last fifty, that has included me. Starting as a manager in 1959, I spent a decade in business, more than twenty years as a consultant, and from the early 1990s have co-directed a global nonprofit. I spent several months refining this new edition. I especially sought to highlight the influence of the past on today's paradoxes. Although the world has changed exponentially since I first wrote PW, my key themes endure like granite. So do principles of productivity, even when confounded by technologies I could not imagine a quarter century ago.

In 1985, I sent an early draft of this book to Eric Trist, a key figure in my story. A few weeks later I flew to Florida, where he was retired, to review with him several cases in which I discerned an emerging new way to improve workplaces. Eric asked a few questions, then replied with a phrase I had never heard. "What you need," he said, "is a 'conceptual emboldening.'" That startled me. I had not known such an act was possible. I soon understood that he was asking me what conclusions I could draw from my cases. On a piece of scratch paper I sketched what I had lived through in my work during the previous quarter century. Such was the origin of "The Learning Curve" that ties together the chapters of this book.

LEARNING CURVE



I will tell you in the pages that follow how experts solving problems morphed into everybody improving whole systems. You can see that these strategies are not mutually exclusive. Maybe you know them all. Indeed, what led me to this edition was that so many people had moved since 1987 toward "everybody improving whole systems." To my handful of past cases, I have the good fortune to bring you forty more examples from colleagues around the world who replicated my experience and added wrinkles of their own.